



The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views

James K. Beilby (Editor), Gregory A. Boyd (Contributor), Joel B. Green (Contributor), Bruce R. Reichenbach (Contributor), Thomas R. Schreiner (Contributor), Paul Rhodes Eddy (Editor)

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A long history of biblical exegesis and theological reflection has shaped our understanding of the atonement today. The more prominent highlights of this history have acquired familiar names for the household of faith: Christus Victor, penal substitutionary, subjective, and governmental. Recently the penal substitutionary view, and particularly its misappropriations, has been critiqued, and a lively debate has taken hold within evangelicalism. This book offers a "panel" discussion of four views of atonement maintained by four evangelical scholars. The proponents and their views are: Gregory A. Boyd: Christus Victor view Joel B. Green: Kaleidescopic view Bruce R. Reichenbach: Healing view Thomas R. Schreiner: Penal Substitutionary view Following an introduction written by the editors, each participant first puts forth the case for their view. Each view is followed by responses from the other three participants, noting points of agreement as well as disagreement. This is a book that will help Christians understand the issues, grasp the differences and proceed toward a clearer articulation of their understanding of the atonement.

The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views Details

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Author : James K. Beilby (Editor) , Gregory A. Boyd (Contributor) , Joel B. Green (Contributor) , Bruce R. Reichenbach (Contributor) , Thomas R. Schreiner (Contributor) , Paul Rhodes Eddy (Editor)

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From Reader Review The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views for online ebook

Tamra says

This is a well done collection of essays about different views of the atonement. Before I read this book, I wasn't aware that there WERE different views of the atonement. There are like 8 or 9 views and this book covers 4 of them.

I only found 1 view compelling in the slightest - the Christus Victor view. It's laid out beautifully in the essay and I found myself going, "Why do we not all jump on board with this model!" It's sadly not the popular model, though you can find pieces of it in different religious teachings. Then I read the other authors' responses to the Christus Victor model and it brought me back to reality - the other views on the Atonement seem to me more easily defensible in terms of scriptural backing as well as current teaching and practice, at least of the Mormon church that I was raised in. Bummer. After that, I only skimmed the other 3 views because I didn't find them compelling, and I actually find them a little (maybe a lot) insulting.

Anyways, if you'd like an academic take on the atonement, this book is a great one. It's a fast read, even with the academic tone. I think you'll like it.

Jimmy says

Though I am not particularly fond of most "three views", "four views" or "counterpoint" kinds of books from my reading of them in the past, I would have to say that this particular work was pretty good. I thought the authors were all clear and stayed focus on the issue. It is a great survey on the atonement debate. Each men were quite able to present their perspective. The introductory chapters by the two editors James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy excellently summarizes the historical positions on the atonement in church history. I believed the lay person will be able to be caught up to speed with this introduction for what follows in the work. With the exception of Joel B. Green's kaleidoscopic view, the other three positions (Christus Victor, healing and Penal substitutionary view) hold that there might be other motifs to the atonement besides the one they are advocating, but believed each of their respective theme is more "important" than the others. That is, their respective view best explains the other motifs. The Kaleidoscopic view instead see no need for other motifs to fit into one arch-perspective. After reading the work, I realized that further discussion of what each view means by their perspective is "important" might be fruitful in the discussion/debate, for it seems the Penal Substitutionary view understood his to be important in the sense of a logical priority of penal substitution to be a prerequisite to the other effects and outcomes of Christ work on the cross, while the Christus Victor and the healing view (which should really be called 'wholistic shalom' view in my opinion) understand importance to mean which motif best allow other motifs of Christ death on the cross to fit in. After the reading I also thought about how any future discussion between the various views might enjoy further progress by being conscious of theological methods used, and a biblical evaluation of the anthropology assumed in each perspective, since the atonement is shaped by it in how the atonement is supposed to be the solution that addresses the problem of man. I show my bias by saying that Thomas Schreiner's presentation for penal substitutionary atonement is a great chapter, his exegetical background was helpful.

Alex Hugo says

“Nothing in the Christian system is of greater consequence than the doctrine of the atonement” - John Wesley. This quote could not be more true and this book could not be more relevant. I had no idea that so much of what we believe about the atonement today is explicitly modern. Great read, I highly recommend it for anyone interested in studying the atonement that does not know where to start.

Kyle Johnson says

This edition of Four Views is both a helpful introduction into atonement theology and a healthy model of Christian dialogue. The 4 writers provide modern renderings of Christus Victor, Penal Substitution Atonement, Healing, and Kaleidoscope.

Bill says

My first multiple views theology book. I had been skeptical about these, thinking that they were "canned theology", but I think I've been won over. It turns out they are an efficient way to get your head around a controversial issue by engaging directly with theologians arguing for their own position. There are weaknesses to the format of course, and in this case it's a shame the Christus Victor and Penal Substitution views appeared to be in conflict. If you're interested in reading the 1000 words I wrote for my M.Div review, see below. (In summary, I naturally settle with Penal Substitution, but I think it needs to be balanced by Christus Victor.)

'The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views' presents four different perspectives on the nature of the Atonement. The book aims to “help Christians understand the issues, grasp the differences and proceed toward a clearer articulation of their understanding of the atonement” (back cover), and it succeeds in this goal. In the introduction Eddy and Beilby outline the historical context of the debate. The body of the book comprises four essays, each followed by responses from the other contributors.

The format has two significant strengths. It is an efficient way to gain an introductory overview of a controversial topic and it allows the reader to engage directly with a variety of theologians, each arguing for their own position. However, the format also has significant weaknesses. The content is necessarily brief and thus introductory at best. The book lacked a consistent approach shared by all contributors, making some chapters less helpful than others. The adversarial structure (whereby the contributors respond to each other) is not ideally suited to the topic because of the amount of agreement between the different authors, whose disagreements concern the relative importance of the positions rather than their validity. This structure also lends itself to repetition, since in their responses the contributors often repeated the arguments from their own chapters. The book was unfortunately weakened by the exclusion of the Christus Exemplar view due to the untimely death of the intended contributor of that chapter.

In section one, Greg Boyd represents the Christus Victor view. Boyd argues that the fundamental achievement of the atonement was that “God defeated the devil”(24), and all other atonement motifs are “best understood within this context”(24). He begins by outlining the warfare motif throughout Scripture

before discussing the many New Testament passages that concern Christ's victory over Satan, convincingly suggesting that only the Christus Victor motif captures the cosmic nature of Christ's achievement. Boyd argues effectively that Christ's entire ministry was concerned with "manifesting the reign of God and vanquishing the reign of the destructive powers"(40). The weakness of Boyd's argument is his inability to explain exactly how Christ defeated the devil. He lists various acts of love from Christ's ministry, concluding rather vaguely that Christ was "conquering evil with love" (39) . Boyd then argues that other atonement theories can be incorporated within the Christus Victor model. At this point he affirms substitutionary atonement but rejects penal substitution, suggesting that Jesus experienced God's wrath only indirectly at the hand of evil powers. Schreiner's response rightly points out that Boyd does not do justice to the Biblical emphasis on forgiveness of sin, and thus "he lacks clarity in explaining how Christ's death led to triumph over demonic powers"(52). Reichenbach makes an interesting point in his response by juxtaposing Boyd's well-known Open Theism with his Christus Victor position, asking whether according to this view God's final victory is necessarily uncertain?

In section two, Tom Schreiner presents the Penal Substitution view. The key to his definition is that "the punishment and penalty we deserved was laid on Jesus Christ instead of us"(67). He argues that Penal Substitution is the "anchor and foundation"(67) of the other atonement motifs. He briefly demonstrates that this satisfaction of God's justice is at the root of all other atonement views, including Christus Victor, the healing view and others. Schreiner outlines the Biblical basis for atonement under the categories of the sinfulness of man, the holiness of God and the sacrifice of Christ. Finally, he highlights the Biblical connection between Christ's sacrifice on our behalf and our own ethical response of following Christ's example, anticipating the argument that a legal understanding of atonement removes motivation for Christian obedience. Green provides a helpful response to Schreiner's chapter, noting that Schreiner relies heavily on concepts from broader reformed theology in his defence of Penal Substitution, which limits the effectiveness of his argument, especially to those from other traditions.

In section three, Bruce Reichenbach presents the healing view of the atonement. He argues that in the atonement, Jesus "takes on our sin and suffering ... to restore us to shalom"(142). Reichenbach begins by examining the biblical human condition characterised by sin and suffering and traces God's Old Testament role as a healer, especially by examining the sacrificial system and the suffering servant in Isaiah. He then examines Jesus' role as a physical and spiritual healer, culminating with him bearing our afflictions on the cross. As each of the other contributors point out in their responses, Reichenbach provides a good summary of the healing view, but fails to argue that it ought to be considered the primary motif. Since Reichenbach leaves this unresolved, Boyd argues that healing in fact results from Christ's victory over evil, and Schreiner argues that healing in fact results from Christ's taking the penalty for our sin.

In section four, Joel Green argues for what he calls the Kaleidoscopic view of the atonement. Green argues that in light of the multiple atonement motifs evident in scripture, we ought not attempt to isolate any one in particular as primary. He begins by helpfully noting that the historical and salvation-history contexts are crucial in clarifying our understanding of Christ's death. Green then outlines briefly the various atonement motifs found in scripture, and notes that all are needed to fully understand the atonement. As Boyd and Schreiner observe in their responses, while this is undoubtedly true, it does not rule out the possibility that one or two of these motifs ought to be considered central or foundational. Further, both Boyd and Reichenbach warn that without a central unifying understanding of the atonement, its message risks becoming relativised according to the interpreter's cultural context.

It is unfortunate that the Christus Victor view and the Penal Substitution view are presented as being in conflict in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*. This may be because Boyd himself strongly rejects penal substitution and Schreiner strongly affirms it, and perhaps also because Boyd, an Open Theist, and

Schreiner, a reformed theologian, occupy such different positions within the evangelical spectrum. This is unfortunate because these two views seem to complement each other well, and together may provide the foundational, primary atonement motif for which the book seeks. The major weakness of the Christus Victor view is that it is unable to explain exactly how the atonement occurs, which is remedied by Penal Substitution. The major weakness of the Penal Substitution view is that risks neglecting the cosmic perspective of God's victorious reign, which Christus Victor remedies. Together, Christus Victor and Penal Substitution offer a foundational, satisfying motif for understanding and proclaiming the nature of the atonement.

Joel Wentz says

As with any book that is a compilation of essays, the reader will need to brace for a mix of writing styles. I personally found two of the writers (Boyd and Green) extremely readable, while the others less so. However, the content of this little book is extremely helpful to anyone with an interest in various understandings of the atonement. In particular, Boyd's response to the penal substitution essay, as well as Green's "kaleidoscopic" essay, were the standout sections of the book. Similar to others in the multi-view series, each writer offers a response to the submissions of the others. This all adds up to a reading experience that will help the reader develop a much more nuanced understanding of a deeply complex theological issue. Recommended for theology nerds!

Lynn Joshua says

Very good presentation of several models of the atonement. Each model presents an answer to the question, "Why did Jesus have to die and what effect does the resurrection have?"

I recommend this book because, as one contributor to this book points out, the Penal Substitutionary model "is so pervasive in American Christianity that many Christians may wonder whether the saving significance of Jesus' death can be understood in any other way." The Christus Victor model, with its emphasis on Christ's victory over the powers of evil, provides an antidote to the tendency to neglect the cosmic perspective of God's victorious reign.

The way in which we view the atonement shapes our image and idea of God and why he did/does what He does. The overview in this collection of essays has given me the desire to dig deeper, and I plan to read the classic defense, Christus Victor by Gustaf Aulen next.

Jeff says

This was a good read about four competing theories of the atonement. There was a surprising amount of agreement between the authors of the four essays; much of the argument was over which model should be seen as the *primary* lens through which the atonement should be viewed.

I approached this book most sympathetic to the kaleidoscopic view (i.e. all models are equally important), and left feeling the same, although Dr. Green, who wrote the kaleidoscopic essay, strayed a little too close to a postmodern feel for my liking.

Recommended for anyone looking to understand the major theories of the atonement or looking to weigh the pros and cons of each of them.

Spencer says

This is a much needed volume. However I think there were deficiencies in what was presented.

Boyd and Schreiner's essays were the clearest. However, both demonstrated an impasse. Neither explained the other's imagery. Boyd did not explain sacrifice language well, nor Schreiner military language.

Schreiner's own explanation of sacrifice was problematic because he forces all sacrifice language into the mold of penal substitution. That is simply not the case. Milgrom's commentary on Leviticus points out that there are many means and goals of the sacrifices of the OT, many of which have nothing to do with punishment.

Schreiner has to squeeze passages into the PSA mold. Take for example Jesus describing his death as a "ransom for many." The context is an act of humiliation and service (the "first becoming last") that frees those enslaved to the demonic powers in the Gospel of Mark. Schreiner takes it to mean a ransom as payment for sin against God. There is some PSA language in Mark, but Schreiner's obsession causes him to gloss all nuance with a big PSA brush.

I often find PSA views tend to do two very big errors: First is trying to ground it on the need to satisfy God's wrath, as if God cannot love unless he kills. That is simply not the case. Jesus forgives in Mark 2 by sheer pronouncement. If the cross is taking on God's wrath, it is an action that Christ does, fully one with the Father, displaying that God himself resolves that he does not require our death for sin, and has gone to that length of substituting himself to communicate this love.

Second, PSA is often way too boiled down. If PSA is taken to a logical extreme, that Jesus died to take our place, there is no reason why Jesus had to die on a cross. He could have just died comfortably in his bed. The cross is a political reality. Jesus was executed by an imperial power, which wielded the power of death to maintain order, with the Temple in bed with it, who accused Jesus of blasphemy. In that regard, popular PSA tends to undermine all these other layers that are deeply important. Schreiner mentions that PSA is the "most" important strand. However, I find it odd how a conservative evangelical would say some scripture are more important than others, as if some are non-essential.

The essay on the healing view was thoroughly unconvincing, and I don't know why the editors chose that view over, for instance, the governmental view or a moral view.

Finally the Kaleidoscope view is, in my opinion, probably the best way of understanding the strands of atonement language, but I did not find Joel Green's essay very good. Green just did not develop what the strands were and why it is better to use all the strands of imagery in unison. To be honest, the essay felt cut and paste.

Interested readers could take a look at Colin Gunton's Actuality of Atonement, Paul Fiddes' Past Event, Present Salvation, James McClendon's Systematic Theology, or Gabriel Fackre's Christian Story if they want to see other explanations of a multi-faceted view of atonement.

So, like I said, good topic, weird delivery.

Blake says

I take it as a rule of charity that, if an argumentative dialogue among different and competing viewpoints is to occur, each viewpoint represented should have a strong representative in its defense. While the Christus Victor view had Gregory Boyd, the Healing view had Bruce Reichenbach, and the Kaleidoscopic view had Joel Green, the Penal Substitution view had Thomas Schreiner. Unfortunately for this book, Schreiner's defense of penal substitution offered hardly anything of substance. His overly simplistic appeals to divine wrath, Pauline allusions to Jewish sacrifice, and select passages reveal more assumptions than arguments. For a more substantive defense of penal substitutionary theory, I recommend Oliver Crisp's "Original Sin and Atonement" in *Oxford Handbook in Philosophical Theology*.

Boyd's defense of Christus Victor has some theoretical appeal, since (as he puts it) the Christus Victor model accounts for other atonement motifs. I have criticized the Christus Victor model on the grounds that it is theoretically unhelpful, since in general it asserts merely that Christ 'overcame sin and darkness.' Theories and models of the atonement ought, I think, to explain how this is accomplished, and it is already a Christian 'given' that Christ's atonement was effective in redeeming the world. Boyd avoids this generality problem by appealing to the self-sacrificial, pacifistic life of Christ, who loved his enemies to the end. (Schreiner, of course, highlights his disagreement with Boyd's pacifism, and devotes an entire, brief footnote to the issue.) This is an admirable improvement, but it is at the cost of some inclusivity. If the means by which Christ overcame sin and darkness was by living a pacifistic life, then it is odd to add that Christ was the punitive scapegoat for human sin: the object of God punishing his enemies through Christ, or Christ instead of them. So it might be that Boyd's Christus Victor must reject certain forms of satisfaction theory; but then, of course, it does not theoretically encompass them. This might be no great disadvantage, since Boyd seems to reject penal substitutionary theories, and surely the atonement isn't at odds with itself. But it does posit a less inclusive model, given Boyd's pacifistic take on Christus Victor.

I have relatively little to say regarding the other essays, save that I commend Reichenbach and Green for their interesting proposals. Their greatest contributions to the book consisted in their responses to Schreiner's essay, where they pointed out many of Schreiner's unargued assumptions.

I was saddened to discover that Philip Quinn's contribution in defense of Moral Exemplar/Influence theory was excluded, since he died shortly before the book's completion. No doubt his contribution would have been both interesting and important, and the exclusion of a moral exemplar/influence view is rather unfortunate. It has occupied an important place in Christian theology and, in recent days, has seen something of a comeback. While I understand the importance of publishing deadlines, this tome ought to have included a representative of the exemplar/influence view.

James Korsmo says

In *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, four scholars are asked to put forth a comprehensive understanding of what they consider to be the foundational metaphor or central thrust of the New Testament's teaching on atonement. They are then asked to interact with each of the other three author's views, facilitating a dialog between the different views and accentuating both commonalities and disagreements. The four scholars and views are as follows:

Gregory Boyd, Christus Victor
Joel B. Green, Kaleidoscopic
Bruce Reichenbach, Healing
Thomsa Schreiner, Penal Substitution

Because of the nature of the book, that is, that each scholar is already abridging an in-depth discussion in their short essays and that each scholar interacts with the others, I will simply restrict my review to some brief comments of evaluation and commendation.

In most evangelical circles, it would seem that the penal substitution view holds sway as the dominant (and sometimes almost the only) view. And Thomas Schreiner does an admirable job of displaying the deep scriptural roots and theological reasoning that make this such an important view. Greg Boyd, in what was maybe for me one of the strongest pieces, displayed the deep scriptural roots of the Christus victor model, showing the importance of victory of death and evil for biblical thinking about sin and salvation. Bruce Reichenbach ably deploys arguments for the healing aspects of atonement, emphasizing forgiveness and reconciliation as part of this understanding. Joel Green's essay was also very strong, emphasizing that the context of Jesus' death and the purposes of God are two essential aspects of thinking about the atonement. This leads him to assert that no one metaphor or model will fully illumine the significance of Christ's death, nor will any one model necessarily be the best way to speak the truth of Christ's death into our cultural setting today.

Each author does their view justice, in showing the deep logic that underpins it and the way the atonement fits within a larger Scriptural and theological framework. Each author also sets out to show how their view sets the foundation for or interacts with other views and metaphors, which make up subsidiary ways of speaking about Christ's death. For this reason, I think this book makes a great entry point into this lively and important dialog about the work of Christ and the nature of the atonement. It deals deliberately with the text of the New Testament and also, in less depth, with the historical interpretations and understandings of Christ and his death.

Donald Linnemeyer says

I found the basic structure of the book really helpful. Since differing atonement views tend to overlap a lot with each other, it can be really difficult to pinpoint the substantial differences. To try and focus on the core of the issue, the editors presented each view as having different starting points or central focuses:

- 1) atonement as defeating satan/sin - Christus Victor
- 2) atonement as satisfying God's wrath/justice/honor - penal atonement
- 3) atonement as healing man - healing view
- 4) atonement with no one center/startng point - kaleidoscopic view

I found the healing view probably the most satisfying, but I found all the authors making good points to take away. Really worth the read.

Two problems though. First, the responses weren't always focused. I felt that I was just starting to narrow in on the substance of the dispute between two authors by the end of the response essay. This is more a complaint about the general structure of four views books, probably.

Second, the penal atonement view was really poorly represented. I'm pretty sure a much better, more charitable case could be more for it than what I found here.

Susie says

Great side-by-side explanations of four interpretations of what Jesus' death means and how it works. I would say that only three of them are major interpretations. First is Christus Victor, which explains Jesus' death in terms of a cosmic conflict with evil. Second is Penal Substitution, which explains Jesus' death as the resolution to a legal situation of human guilt. Last is the Kaleidoscopic View, which argues for equal emphasis on the multiple metaphors for Jesus' death in the Scriptures. The other one (healing) is more of a supplementary type of understanding that does not claim to be central or paradigmatic for understanding others.

One of my favorite features of this book is that each author responds to the exposition of the others. So each view is followed by three responses. They are very helpful for critically appraising each view.

I'd recommend this book for anyone who feels like they want to learn more about how Jesus' death saves people, or who feels like they might only have one way of seeing it.

Jonathan Roberts says

Teaching on the Atonement in class so I got this to none up on other views that I am not familiar with. Some entries were better than others, but a clear understanding can be had by reading this. I wish the kaleidoscope view would have been more clear, I feel having read all four views that there is not one view that is perfect but all four are needed. Good solid biblical teaching! Enjoyed this book. Recommended

Brian says

Great book! I loved reading from four different people who were defending their particular view of atonement. I also loved that each person had the chance to respond to the other views presented. This is a great book for gaining a basic understanding of the arguments for each view of atonement.
